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# Mental Health Awareness week: a student-led session exploring contemporary themes related to anxiety and depression

By Paul Canning, Karen Galway and Jean Nugent, School of Nursing and Midwifery

*Mental Health Awareness week is a national campaign promoted by the Mental Health Foundation that runs every May. Queen's University Belfast (QUB) Staff Wellbeing Team plan and organise a range of events to complement the national efforts taking place in workplaces, schools, hospitals and communities to promote positive mental health and challenge the stigma that can prevent people seeking appropriate support. This year, the School of Nursing and Midwifery was invited to take part. Teaching staff in the School translated this offer into a learning opportunity for the mental health nursing students in Year 2 of the BSc Nursing programme to develop and facilitate an event. This article briefly describes the process that followed, in relation to the students' wider learning and development.*



**Figure 1 Year 2 BSc. Mental Health Nursing Student Volunteers**

Mental Health nursing students at Queen's undertake a 3-year programme of theory and clinical practice placements. In Year 2, the students focus on field-specific mental health modules and learning. Staff from the mental health team initially liaised with the Staff Wellbeing Team to ascertain and agree an appropriate slot for hosting an event for all employees across the University. Consideration had to be given to the students' academic workload, which at this time was considerable, being in the lead-up to a very busy period of assessment. It was decided that, in order to reduce undue pressure, students would be offered the chance to volunteer for involvement.

The proposal to develop a student-led session was presented to the students in class and followed up by an email, which was sent to all 48 Year 2 mental health students, as a way of providing further explanation of how the proposed event might be coordinated. A date was then set to establish the level of interest and

to brainstorm any initial thoughts and ideas. A very enthusiastic group of 16 students attended the initial meeting facilitated by Paul Canning (Lecturer in the Mental Health Team). Students very quickly took the initiative to address two topics; anxiety and depression in the contemporary context of the use of social media. They divided themselves into two working groups and arranged a time to meet for further review. Effective organisational and communication skills were demonstrated by the students who used social media to share ideas and make decisions when not in university. Further review sessions as well as a practice delivery session were facilitated by three lecturers in the Mental Health Team (Paul Canning, Karen Galway and Jean Nugent), to provide guidance, support, feedback and encouragement.

The lunchtime session was held on 12 May 2015. The event was well attended by University employees from a variety of settings and Schools across the University. The title of the session was 'A student-led session exploring contemporary themes related to anxiety and depression'. The students provided two linked presentations using a variety of audio-visual media, and contributed to a lively discussion with attendees afterwards. Verbal feedback from attendees and from the Staff Wellbeing Team was very positive. A good level of discussion ensued in relation to anxiety and depression and the wider challenges we face in overcoming mental ill-health. The exploration of contemporary themes in relation to the use of social media was also well received. Presenting the contrast between the potential positive impacts and the potential negative impacts of our use (and abuse) of social media on mental health and wellbeing proved to be an interesting approach taken by the students which struck a chord with attendees.

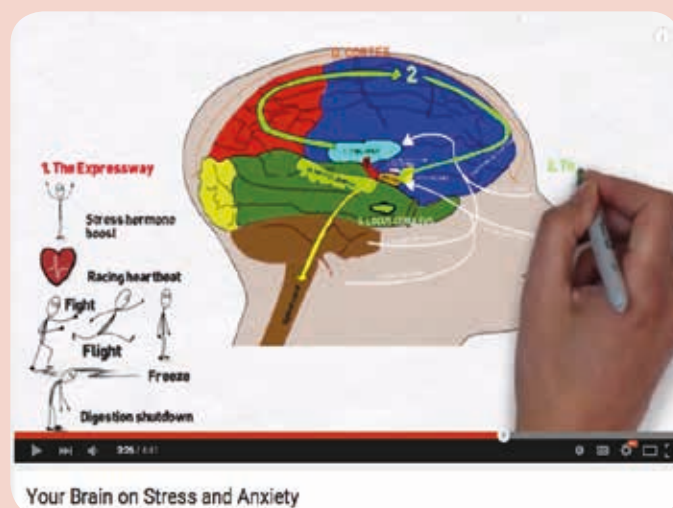
The Staff Wellbeing Team gathered email evaluations that supported the initial impressions gathered regarding expectations, the value of discussion time and recommendation of the event to others. Attendees also valued the

knowledge of the student presenters and provided useful constructive criticism on the delivery of information. This feedback was also provided to the students who expressed a strong sense of achievement, and some relief! There is no doubt that the development and facilitation of such an event for members of staff within the wider University was a challenge for Year 2 undergraduates, but one which they approached in a professional and enthusiastic manner.

Reflection upon this project highlights the importance of supporting students to develop the broader skills and qualities of 'graduateness'<sup>1</sup> whilst studying here at QUB. The independent nature of a student-led approach proved an excellent opportunity to develop and enhance skills such as: organisation, team work, public speaking, reflectiveness and problem-solving, outside timetabled teaching and without the pressure of assessment. It also provided the students with an opportunity to consolidate, demonstrate and practically apply their field specific learning<sup>2</sup>. These are skills that the students and their employers will value when entering their chosen profession of Mental Health Nursing. Student achievement in facilitating this session to the wider University staff body was then circulated via Twitter and Facebook.

Having successfully engaged with staff, the Mental Health Nursing students are now seeking to use this experience and confidence to consider how the session may be altered, enhanced and developed for the benefit of students studying at the University. Thought is also been given as to how students may fundraise to promote positive mental health and reduce stigma, and we hope this will become an annual part of Mental Health Awareness Week at Queen's.

Overall, this experience has been very positive for students and rewarding for the staff involved. It was very pleasing to see the students deliver evidence-



**Figure 2 Screenshot from the student presentation. Your Brain on Stress and Anxiety by John Kenworthy, available at <https://youtu.be/gmwiJ6ghLIM>**

based mental health awareness content that they had carefully researched and gathered for the purpose, with only minimal guidance and support from staff. The opportunity to work alongside the students in the development and facilitation of such a project complements the belief that truly authentic education is not carried out for the student, but rather *with* the student. It also eloquently reflects the collaborative approach that is necessary when working in the field of mental health, which is by nature a multi-disciplinary endeavour. By embracing such an approach we, as staff, may indeed help to encourage a truer attainment of *wisdom*, at the avoidance of a mere *acquisition of knowledge*. We recommend that seeking out and embracing such learning opportunities should be considered by all teaching staff across the University.

1. Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Sheed & Ward.

2. Hill, P and Tinker, A, (2013) Integrating Learning Development into the student Experience. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*. Vol. 5 [Online] Available: <http://www.aladinhe.ac.uk/ojs/index.php?journal=jldhe&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=172> [Accessed 26/6/15]